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Committee on Conferences
Substantive session of 2006

Draft report

Addendum

Rapporteur: Mr. Diego **Simancas** (Mexico)

II. Calendar of conferences and meetings

D. Requests for exceptions to section I, paragraph 7, of General Assembly resolution 40/243

Introduction and overview

1. At its 475th and 476th meetings, on 11 September 2006, the Committee on Conferences considered the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences (A/61/129), chapter III, section C and annex III, concerning requests from subsidiary bodies, with an explanation of reasons and an additional request sent subsequently for exceptions to be made to section I, paragraph 7, of General Assembly resolution 40/243, in which the Assembly had decided that no subsidiary organ of the General Assembly might meet at United Nations Headquarters during a regular session of the Assembly unless explicitly authorized by the Assembly. Owing to the timing of its session, from 11 to 15 September 2006, the Committee handled the matter via written communications.

Conclusions and recommendations

2. The Committee on Conferences recommended that the General Assembly explicitly authorize the following bodies to meet in New York during the main part of its sixty-first session, on the understanding that all such meetings would be allocated conference services on an as-available basis in such a way that the work of the Assembly and its Main Committees would not be impeded:

(a) Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People

(b) Committee on Relations with the Host Country

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II. Calendar of conferences and meetings

Impact on meetings held at Headquarters during the implementation of the capital master plan, strategy IV (phased approach)

Introduction and overview

1. At its 477th meeting, on 12 September, the Committee considered the report of the Secretary-General on the impact of the capital master plan on meetings to be held at Headquarters during its implementation (A/61/300).

Discussion

2. Satisfaction was expressed that the implementation of the capital master plan would not cause any interruption in meetings planned for Headquarters, and that careful planning would ensure that the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management could maintain the quality of conference services provided without adversely affecting the working conditions of language staff. Although some delegations expressed regret at the loss of exhibition space during construction, a representative of the Secretariat said that the temporary facility was intended to be a basic functional space that would replace core facilities, and that replacing exhibit space in a temporary facility would not be cost-effective. It was noted that, while all meetings on the calendar could be accommodated, there would be less flexibility during construction for the many side events that often accompanied sessions of certain bodies. Greater flexibility would necessarily be shown for meetings of the Security Council, the General Assembly and the high-level segment of the Economic and Social Council, but in general meetings should be as predictable as possible in order to avoid additional costs that would be

06-52093 (E)

incurred from construction delays caused by meetings held outside normal working hours.

3 The Committee expressed appreciation for the continuous interaction between the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management and the capital master plan project. It intended to keep the matter under constant review and to request the Secretary-General to report periodically thereon to the General Assembly through the Committee.

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III. Integrated global management

Introduction and overview

1. At its 476th and 477th meetings, on 11 and 12 September respectively, the Committee on Conferences considered the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences, section II, concerning integrated global management (A/61/129, paras. 2 to 12). Progress had been made by the task forces established under the integrated global management project in identifying and harmonizing/standardizing common approaches to administrative policies, practices and procedures across the four duty stations of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management at New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi. The seventh Coordination Meeting of Conference Managers, held at Vienna in June 2006, had reached new agreement in the areas of proactive document management, capacity calculations, a common terminology database for language staff and computer-assisted translation.

2. A non-paper on the information technology global initiative was circulated, highlighting the major findings of a study conducted across the four duty stations with the help of a consultancy firm. In response to the recommendations from the study, an information technology governance board under the Assistant Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management was established, along with three project teams to launch a centrally hosted reporting database, to further integrate the current meetings management system across the duty stations and to conduct a technical evaluation with a view to standardizing the document management systems at all duty stations.

06-52143 (E)

Discussion

3. Delegations welcomed the progress made and looked forward to seeing the compendium of information on the results of the task forces established in 2004-2005. One delegation was of the view that the integrated global management initiative could be considered successful if it ensured a balanced division of labour among the four duty stations. Progress in implementation of many of the Department's initiatives was noted, but some delegations felt that innovations should be introduced in an evolutionary way, with the main emphasis on improving quality of services. In reply to the concerns expressed by a number of delegations regarding computer-assisted translation (CAT) and its effect on quality and accuracy, a representative of the Secretariat stressed that such tools were not to be confused with machine translation. They could be useful when applied to the 25 to 30 per cent of the translation workload that could be considered repetitive, providing translators with a database of previously translated material which they were free to accept or reject as appropriate.

4. It was emphasized that the global management project was a continuous process and that some of its components, such as a standardized methodology for calculating capacity and workload sharing and the common terminology database, were not yet a reality. In reply to questions raised in the discussion, a representative of the Secretariat said that the terminology coordination board rotated the chairmanship among the duty stations. The regional commissions were also interested in joining the process and had become full members. Although the membership of that board did not currently cover each official language, the terminology specialists in each duty station could be consulted when necessary.

5. Several delegations stressed that the funding of the central planning and coordination function in Nairobi from the regular budget was crucial in order to ensure parity across duty stations, while one delegation did not favour that action. While some delegations considered that integrated global management was a departmental initiative that could be implemented as the tools became available, one delegation believed that a mandate from the General Assembly was required.

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Draft report

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Documentation and publication-related matters

A. Submission, availability and distribution of documentation

Introduction and overview

1. At its 477th meeting, on 12 September 2006, the Committee considered the sections of the report of the Secretary-General on pattern of conferences concerning document management (A/61/129, paras. 44-67 and annex IV). The Committee was informed that, in the interests of clear accountability, statistics on the submission, processing and issuance of all slotted documents for the first half of 2006 were presented in annex IV. The Department of General Assembly and Conference Management had made advance planning, capacity planning and dynamic prioritization the three pillars of its proactive document management system, applied with flexibility in view of the fluidity of the conference-servicing needs of intergovernmental bodies. Through intensive work with author departments, using the tools of the slotting system and waiver management, the timeliness of submissions under the mandated 10-4-6 framework had improved, but showed room for further improvement. Capacity planning was aimed at matching capacity with expected workload. Dynamic prioritization referred to the assignment of priority ratings that changed as documents approached the time when they were to be considered and constituted a way of adjusting to work overloads while providing the documents most needed for deliberations by intergovernmental bodies. The Committee's support for the enforcement of past decisions on the control and limitation of documentation was solicited.

2. As requested by Member States, the Department had set up a variety of transparency and accountability mechanisms. To invite feedback from intergovernmental bodies on ways to improve client satisfaction, it had instituted the

practice of providing document-service reports to the presiding officers of bodies receiving pre-session documents; a total of 29 such reports had been provided by June 2006 and 10 responses received, generally positive. As an author department, the Department insisted on 100 per cent compliance with submission deadlines by its staff.

Discussion

3. The Committee stressed that it attached great importance to both the quality and the timeliness of documentation. The progress made in timely issuance was welcome, but much more needed to be done to improve compliance with General Assembly decisions on the distribution of documents in accordance with the six-week rule, although it was acknowledged that failure to comply with that rule was sometimes due to factors beyond the control of the Department. The advances in electronic inputting and electronic document management were also welcomed. The importance of simultaneous distribution in all official languages was stressed, and greater vigilance was requested in ensuring that documents were not published on the website in only some of the official languages.

4. In response to a request for clarification, a representative of the Secretariat explained that the handful of 8-4-4 arrangements mentioned in paragraph 47 of the report of the Secretary-General were not a pilot project but an effort to accommodate certain bodies that had stated a preference for a later submission deadline for their documents and in return could accept later issuance. The Executive Boards of the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Population Fund, for example, held three sessions per year and had only 11 weeks between sessions, which made a 10-week prior submission date for the authors impracticable. Some delegations expressed interest in the 8-4-4 experiment and commended the Secretariat for taking the initiative to find a solution that worked for both parties. In answer to the question of whether the bodies that had opted out of the 10-4-6 format were actually experiencing more timely issuance of their pre-session documents, the representative of the Secretariat responded that, although issuance four weeks prior to sessions had not been fully achieved, the timeliness of issuance for those bodies had clearly improved.

5. In answer to the question of whether efforts were continuing to persuade depository libraries to waive their entitlement to hard copies of documents, a representative of the Secretariat explained that such efforts had not borne fruit, in part because some libraries in developing countries were not equipped to handle electronic copies successfully. However, the Secretariat was reminded that the mandate to continue its efforts in that regard was still in effect.

6. With regard to the request contained in paragraph 53 of the report concerning exceptions to page limits, delegations asked whether the Secretariat was asking the Committee to recommend that a mechanism be set up in the Fifth Committee to review exceptions on a case-by-case basis. It was agreed instead that a gentle reminder that all matters relating to conference management, including documentation, fell within the purview of the Fifth Committee would suffice.

7. Committee members welcomed the efforts to establish mechanisms of transparency and to solicit feedback on client satisfaction but felt that much more should be done in that regard. Most of the mechanisms mentioned in the report were internal and went no further than a committee secretariat. Since the key performance

indicator was the satisfaction of Member States with the services provided, it was crucial that the Secretariat take a proactive approach towards evaluating the feedback of Member States on the quality of conference services, in accordance with the relevant provisions of General Assembly resolution 60/236 B. It was suggested that if the many comments on document availability voiced in the various intergovernmental bodies were compiled, tabulated and analysed, the Secretariat would receive a clearer picture of the views of Member States. The website was another means of receiving feedback that could be more thoroughly utilized.

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IV. Documentation and publication-related matters

B. Provision of summary records

Introduction and overview

1. At its 479th meeting, on 13 September 2006, the Committee considered the section of the report concerning the provision of summary records (A/61/129, paras. 73-80). In an effort to address the concerns of Member States, the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management initiated a project at Headquarters to clear the backlog of summary records. It had succeeded in issuing records of all meetings held back to 2003 and had tackled the backlog relating to 2002 and earlier, as capacity became available. In addition, a pilot project was undertaken during the sixtieth session of the General Assembly to issue all summary records of the regular session within three months of its close, a target that was successfully met. In 2005, the English Translation Service had drafted all summary records.

2. The Secretariat was exploring the practical and financial implications of the various approaches proposed to the provision of summary records, which include replacing summary records with digital recordings, reducing the number of bodies entitled to summary records, concentrating précis-writing in the English Translation Service, restricting the length of summary records to 5,000 words and eliminating publishing and distribution of summary records.

Discussion

3. The Committee commended the progress made in clearing the backlog of summary records and in the timely issuance of the records of the sixtieth session of the General Assembly. Some delegations expressed concern that concentrating the

drafting of summary records in the English Translation Service could adversely affect linguistic parity, however. A status report was also requested on investigation of the possibility of replacing summary records with digital recordings of meetings.

4. A representative of the Secretariat said that the pilot project to concentrate drafting of summary records in the English Translation Service was a pragmatic response to the need to speed up issuance of records, and in no way represented unequal treatment of one official language. All records were translated into all official languages before being issued. The possibility of producing digital recordings of meetings, currently in use in some other international organizations, was still being explored. A summary record represented added value, as a succinct record of a meeting that contained all decisions and actions taken. On the other hand, the cost of digital or DVD recordings could be significantly lower. It was for Member States, as the primary users of meeting records, to decide what product was most useful to them.

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V. Translation- and interpretation-related matters

Introduction and overview

1. At its 478th and 479th meetings, on 13 September 2006, the Committee considered the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences, section V, concerning translation- and interpretation-related matters (see A/61/129, paras. 68-69, "Workload standards"; paras. 70-72, "Self-revision"; and paras. 81-86, "Quality of language services and qualified language staff"). In introducing the report, the Under-Secretary-General drew particular attention to the statement of the executive session of the 2006 International Annual Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications (IAMLADP) held at Vienna in June 2006, which had expressed concern that conference and language professionals possessing the high level of expertise and experience required by international organizations were in short supply on the commercial market and had concluded that investment in the training of language professionals should be accorded high priority.

2. Representatives of conference services at the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi participated via videoconference in the 478th meeting of the Committee, on 13 September 2006, and discussed the theme of quality of services and client satisfaction.

Nairobi

3. The Chief of Conference Services at Nairobi said that, since the United Nations Office at Nairobi was dependent for roughly 50 per cent of its funding on extrabudgetary resources, conference services there had a different modus operandi and a different approach to quality than the other duty stations. The extrabudgetary clients could stipulate the level of service they wanted and often, for reasons of cost

or speed, chose to do without editing and revision. They might also request documentation to be issued later than six weeks prior to publication in order to be able to incorporate the most up-to-date information.

4. It should be recognized that quality came at a cost. The Office outsourced 30 per cent of its work, and there was no doubt that outsourcing had an impact on quality, since it was rarely possible to revise the work in-house; at most, it could be spot-checked for format and certain terminology. Nevertheless, the Office usually worked with the same freelance translators, who were experienced in the environmental subject areas that Office dealt with.

5. While local freelance translators were available, there were very few qualified local freelance interpreters. For major sessions it was necessary to borrow interpreters from other duty stations, although interpreters at Nairobi, who met the global standards of the Organization, often worked at other duty stations during slow periods at home. The Office lacked professional-level editing staff, but had high-level General Services text-processing staff who were also involved in proofreading, building databases and referencing. In order to improve quality, there was a great need for a training facility in Africa, like the one that had been operated from 1978 to 1984 at the Economic Commission for Africa, to train translators and interpreters in international conference work. That need had been recognized by representatives of the European Commission at the IAMLADP meeting, and help from the European institutions might be forthcoming in setting up such a facility again at some location in Africa.

6. With regard to client satisfaction, the United Nations Office at Nairobi had the best possible proof in that its extrabudgetary clients, who were not obliged to use its services, continued to come back. In addition, it used post-session surveys, but found that the results tended to be slanted by the successful or unsuccessful outcome of the meetings, extraneous to conference services. Nairobi therefore had a practice of contacting the secretariats of its client bodies directly and had heard no complaints about conference services other than those regarding the physical limitations of the Nairobi facilities. It also made a practice of meeting directly with the States members of its main client organizations. Indeed, because of its charge-back system, Nairobi had become a flexible, client-oriented organization.

Geneva

7. The Director of Conference Services in Geneva said that some of the mechanisms used in Geneva to measure client satisfaction included meetings of the Director-General with regional groups, information meetings held twice a year between conference services and the missions, client satisfaction surveys and a thanks and complaints file in which all such letters were compiled for analysis. Conference services in Geneva found it indispensable to maintain an ongoing dialogue with clients and therefore had nearly monthly meetings with its most regular clients, such as the Human Rights Council, the Economic Commission for Europe and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. Outsourcing was done with client agreement.

Vienna

8. The Chief of Conference Services at Vienna said that quality was an essential feature of the products and services provided to clients, covering such factors as accuracy, readability, consistency, suitability for the end purpose and uniformity across languages. A matrix of criteria determined the risk that could arise if the quality of a product was not adequate, including its political, diplomatic and legal importance and sensitivity, its intended circulation and the lifetime the document was expected to have, especially if it was placed on the Internet. There were indeed different levels of quality, generally described in such terms as poor, good, high, excellent, and so on, yet it was hard to imagine a client or user who would be willing to accept a "poor" level of quality. Conference Services and the client must come to an agreement on compromises regarding the level of quality in return for speed. He noted, however, that clients tended not to notice or appreciate quality until there was a deterioration. It must also be acknowledged that quality came at a cost: revision was one of the best ways of ensuring quality of translation and reducing errors, but it was costly and time-consuming.

9. However, more went into quality than revision. Since the quality of the manuscripts submitted by author departments had such a strong impact on the quality and cost of documents and their timely issuance, Conference Services at Vienna, with the support of Headquarters in New York, was implementing a pilot editorial outreach project, which would include a help desk to provide online or phone support to authors, an online course for report writers and a template that drafters would be asked to use when starting a new report. Other practices aimed at improving quality involved drafting and consistency groups comprising translators, delegations and experts; pre- and post-session discussions with the secretariats of the calendar bodies, with the participation of translators and interpreters, to review terminology and other language quality issues.

10. Since it was planning a strong increase in outsourcing, Vienna aimed to maintain a core staff able to ensure the quality of external translations and to reclassify a post in each language section as a P-5 senior reviser responsible for quality control and the training of external translators, while a P-4 post in all languages would be responsible for information technology and computer-assisted translation tools in addition to translation duties.

11. With regard to interpretation, Vienna had only 20 interpreters and was obliged to hire an equal number of freelancers if more than one set of meetings was being held at a time. The utilization rate was nearly 90 per cent. Recruitment of non-local freelance interpreters was frequent, since few qualified interpreters were available locally. While there were no complaints about the regular interpreters, the International Atomic Energy Agency, which used roughly 40 per cent of the interpretation services, had raised the issue of interpretation quality in relation to freelancers. In general, the subject matter dealt with in Vienna was highly technical and on-the-job training was necessary for high quality. An additional 10 interpretation posts would go far to alleviate the situation.

12. The client was the final judge of the usefulness of the product but was not always in a position to judge the accuracy of a translation or interpretation. Consequently, client surveys provided only a partial indication of quality, especially since the response to surveys was typically poor. Since shorter surveys yielded a greater response, Vienna had simplified the survey prepared in New York; it planned

to put a basic questionnaire on document quality on every copy distributed in the conference rooms and to develop a similar pop-up window for the website that provided access to documents issued in Vienna.

Discussion

Nairobi

13. The Committee welcomed the reduction in the vacancy rate in interpretation posts but expressed concern about the persisting difficulty in filling Arabic interpretation posts and the slow process of filling the newly created P-3 information technology post. Delegations queried the reasons for departures from the six-week document issuance rule but were assured that it responded to client requests. A number of members encouraged Nairobi to quantify what resources or conversions of posts to regular budget would be needed to increase quality.

14. With regard to the information technology post, the Committee was told that in the absence of qualified internal or external candidates, Nairobi was canvassing other duty stations to see if a qualified person could be loaned for one or two years. The representative of conference services in Nairobi, on request, promised to supply a list of the main clients and the proportion of services they received. With regard to the difficulties of filling interpretation vacancies, he explained that the post structure at Nairobi, which did not provide opportunities for advancement, was a factor and that the low utilization rate for interpreters, which meant that they had to travel frequently, was another deterrent to recruitment. The rate could not easily be increased, since Nairobi had reached its physical meetings capacity limit. Nairobi had benefited from an increase in its regular budget in real terms in the past few years, but extrabudgetary funding had also increased, so that it still represented half of funding.

Geneva

15. In response to questions, the representative of Conference Services at Geneva said that the overall level of client satisfaction with conference services in Geneva was good. It was true that as the Human Rights Council struggled to establish its modus operandi it was requesting many after-hours and weekend meetings and last-minute documents, straining the normal system, but difficulties would eventually be smoothed out. Thanks to the intervention of the then Assistant Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management, many issues had been resolved with the Joint Inspection Unit, which had reduced the number of requested waivers.

Vienna

16. Interest was expressed in the editorial outreach project, which, once developed, could be used by other duty stations. It was questioned whether the proposed translation post structure would be adequate to ensure the quality of external translations. It was noted that in the hiring of temporary staff on the local market the different languages were not treated equally, but it was explained that the availability of local qualified freelancers differed from language to language. Questions were raised about the possibility of the participation of the International Atomic Energy Agency in finding funding for new interpretation posts. In response to questions, the representative of Conference Services at Vienna outlined some of

the information technology applications that were being developed in Vienna, including management reporting, meetings planning and servicing and documentation processing systems; Vienna was currently using e-Meets instead of the older Documents Control and Productivity Monitoring System (DCPMS) module, and the Vienna-developed e-APG system for interpreter assignments was being used at all other duty stations.

17. The view was expressed that the success of intergovernmental negotiations often depended on the quality of the translation and interpretation into all six official languages. However, quality was predicated on the provision to all the language services of equally favourable working conditions. There appeared to be inequality in particular from service to service in the recruitment of local and non-local temporary assistance. The practice of recruiting short-term language staff for certain language services on a local basis, regardless of their actual domicile, for the sake of financial savings, represented unequal treatment and could compromise the quality of conference services.

18. Concern was expressed about the shortage in qualified language staff that could result from the demographic changes in the language services combined with the decline in the number of applicants for United Nations language examinations in recent years, and the need for a plan to deal with the problem was stressed. On learning that the Under-Secretary-General was planning to accompany representatives of the European Commission on a visit to some universities in the United States of America in an attempt to reverse the apparent decline in interest in language study, delegations expressed support for outreach to universities to promote the training of language professionals in all countries where United Nations official languages were used. It was suggested that the experience of the centre set up by the Government of the Russian Federation to train translators and interpreters for international conference work could be helpful to others. The representative of the Secretariat assured the Committee that outreach efforts would encompass all official languages and noted that candidates trained at the Moscow centre had demonstrated excellent professional skills in the recent language examinations.

19. In response to questions about why recent language examinations had not resolved the vacancy situation, a representative of the Secretariat said that not only were there fewer applicants but that they had also displayed an observable decline in writing skills. The Office of Human Resources Management had capacity to organize only a certain number of examinations per year. Perhaps the time was coming to ask the General Assembly for a different pattern of exams. Although some unusual measures, such as offering retirees a chance to be rehired if they were willing to forego pension benefits, were being contemplated to meet the anticipated shortage, in general it was the policy of the Organization to minimize any extensions after retirement age. With regard to mobility, the Secretariat believed that the mobility policy in its full version would be impractical for the language services, owing in part, as Committee members had pointed out, to the special skills and knowledge needed in certain places. The Department had put forward positive proposals to involve language staff in mobility as much as possible without disrupting service at the duty stations.

20. In response to requests for clarification about the comprehensive methodology for performance measurement and management from a full-system perspective, mentioned in paragraph 69 of the report (A/61/129), a representative of the

Secretariat explained that the Department was attempting to replace a one-dimensional approach to performance measurement by developing an array of indicators on timeliness, quality, financial performance and client satisfaction. In response to questions about follow-up to complaints, he said that verified mistakes were brought to the attention of the translator or interpreter concerned with the intention that it should be a learning experience.

21. A concern was raised about a statement made during a language-specific meeting that the opinions of the chiefs of booth in the interpretation services concerning the quality of the work of the staff were frequently ignored. The assurance was given that the assessment of the chief of booth was taken very seriously in determining the qualifications of temporary staff, although the chief of service reserved the right to hire an interpreter on a provisional basis in case of urgent need, even if the chief of booth's opinion was somewhat unfavourable.